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Special Section: News from the Glacier

John Haines

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News from the Glacier

a portfolio of new work

INTO THE GLACIER

With the green lamp of the spirit
of sleeping water
taking us by the hand . . .

Deeper and deeper,
a luminous blackness opening
like the wings of raven—

as though a heavy wind
were rising through all the houses
we lived in—

the cold rushing in,
our blankets flying away
into the darkness,
and we, naked and alone,
awakening forever . . .

by
John Haines

THE WRITER AS ALASKAN: BEGINNINGS AND REFLECTIONS

As a poet I was born in a particular place, a hillside overlooking the Tanana River in central Alaska, where I built a house and lived for the better part of twenty-two years. It was there, in the winter of 1947-48, I began writing poetry seriously, and there years later I wrote my first mature poems. Many things went into the making of those poems and the others I've written since. The air of the place, rock, water and soil. Snow and ice, human history, birds, animals and insects. Other things, surely, not related directly to the place: the words of other poets, learned once and forgotten, and remembered again. Old stories from childhood, voices out of dreams. Images, a way of seeing got partly from several years study as a painter and sculptor. And further, human relationships, life shared with another person whose existence mingled with my own, so that we saw the world as one person. But it was finally the *place* that provided the means of unifying all these into a single experience.

There must have been in me from an early age some vague design of such a place and such a life. I grew up more or less homeless, moved from place to place, and came, I think, to regard all residences and relationships as only temporary. There must have been in me a great wish for something more permanent. What I got from that early life was a good sense of geography, but also great insecurity, and uncertainty about who I was. I think I knew that I had to find a place, and in a real sense be born over again as my own person.

Why I chose that place rather than another probably can't be answered completely. I might have gone elsewhere and become a very different poet and person. But there was, most likely, no other region where I might have had that original experience of the North American wilderness. Unlike other "wilderness" areas, Alaska in those days seemed open-ended. I could walk north from my homestead at Richardson all the way to the Arctic Ocean, and never cross a road nor encounter a village. This may no longer be true, but the illusion of it then gave the country an air of limitlessness and

mystery hard to find now on this planet.

From the first day I set foot in interior Alaska, and more specifically on Richardson Hill, I knew I was home. Something in me identified with that landscape. I had come, let's say, to the dream place. Not exactly, of course, for there never was an exact place, but something so close I could accept it at once. I think such recognitions must be rare, and I was extremely fortunate to have it happen when it did and as it did. Such a purity of feeling, of joy and of being in the right place, I have not often felt since.

What that experience meant to me, in terms of self-finding and the sort of work I was to do, could be told at great length. But I will only try to suggest in this essay what seem to me to be some of the more important elements in it. There was, first of all, the experience of the wilderness itself, of finding life on some more basic terms than those given me without thought as a child. To make a general statement: at times it becomes necessary for people to turn back and grasp real things. One of the consequences of having a culture and a language is that these begin to exist for themselves in place of the original things we once lived by. Words become abstract, institutions and customs unfastened to anything necessary or authentic. And they begin subtly to sap vitality from us; we begin to live falsely, and afterwhile it becomes necessary for us to turn away from them and find ourselves once more in the hard, irreducible world of simple things, of rock and water, fire and wood, flesh and blood.

So here, on a steep hillside seventy miles from Fairbanks, was a place to begin. It was for me the beginning of what I have come to understand as the myth-journey of humankind. This life of food-gathering, of making for ourselves out of what we can find around us, this is what we come from, and what we return to. Out of this, into what?

The Scottish poet, Edwin Muir, in his poems and autobiography, speaks of it in terms of the biblical Fall from Paradise, and he may be right. Think what we have done to the earth and ourselves. This fallen kingdom, witnessed in the landscapes we have made everywhere and go on making, scenes devoid of beauty or grandeur. I can still remember the intensity of my feeling, of actual pain and outrage, seeing the landscape of Southern California once more after twelve years in the wilderness. I saw it slowly, as one drives south from Alaska, through Canada, the accumulating ruin of the North American landscape. I am exaggerating, perhaps, but not much.

I had when younger a habit of mind, of dreaminess, a vague drifting through the world. I was naturally observant but unfocused. Living as I did there at Richardson, limited by circumstances to a small area, I found it necessary to learn more and more about it in order to get a living from it. I was forced to pay attention, to learn in detail many things of a kind I could not have learned merely passing through. I learned quickly, because it was an adventure for me, a young person from the city unused to knowing intimately any place, to distinguish real things, particular and exact, from the vague and general character of the world. Words began to fasten themselves once more to things. I learned the names of things to be found there, characteristic of the sub-arctic the world over; trees and other plants, their sorts and uses, what made good building material or fuel and what did not, what could be eaten, preserved and put up for later use. I began for the first time to make things, to build shelters, weave nets, make sleds and harnesses, and train animals for work. I learned how to hunt, to watch and to listen, to think like a moose, if need be, or a marten or a lynx. I watched the river water, and saw under that grey, rippling silt the red trace of salmon, and knew where to set my nets. I read the snow and what was written there; the forms of frost, the seeding of the grasses, the swelling of the birch leaves. I watched a tree, an aspen, no bigger than my wrist when I first built there, grow tenfold over the years, until I had to cut away its branches every year from the rain gutters of the house.

Digging in the soil, picking away the rock, uprooting stumps, I became in time a grower of things sufficient to feed myself. Slowly finding my way into the skills of hunter and trapper, I understood what blood and bone, hide and muscle, marrow and sinew really are; not as things read about, but as things touched and handled until they became familiar to me as my own skin. Land itself came alive for me as it never had before, more alive sometimes than the people who moved about on it. I learned that it is land, place, that makes people, provides for them the possibilities they will have of becoming something more than mere lumps of sucking matter. We today who live so much from the inheritance of land and culture do not understand this as well as we need to. Few of us these days are really residents anywhere, in the deep sense of that term. We merely live off the surface of things and places, the culture as well as the land; a derivative life, taking what we find without thought, without regard

for origin or consequences, and unaware for the most part that the resources, both natural and cultural, are fast diminishing.

Big lessons, and basic things, certainly, and I was a long time assimilating them, understanding their significance. Never really privileged in youth, I was never in actual want, either. Like most people in our society I did not know what it was to be hungry, to look for food and find myself short when I needed it most. That old life, unchanged for centuries, in time with the seasons, the rising and setting of the sun, the coming and going of birds and animals, the sources of food and light, became for me not a passage in a book of histories, but a matter of daily occurrence, a way still vital and full of meaning. I grew to feel that if civilization failed, I could still make my way, and in general thrive. I still feel that way, though I am old enough to know that it might not be as easy for me now as it was ten or fifteen years ago.

The place I lived in, Richardson, which included Banner Creek and the Tenderfoot area, had once been a well-populated gold-mining camp, from around 1905 until the late teens or early twenties. As with many such settlements, conditions changed fast, and by the time I came there in 1947, only six or eight persons still lived along the creeks, or in the hills above the Tanana. Most of the buildings were gone, and it was only by listening to what the residents told me that I learned some of the history of Richardson. And what I learned seemed to confirm what Thomas Hardy once said in respect to local life, long residence in a certain place, and the changes he had seen take place in his lifetime:

"... The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humors, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which has led to a break in continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folklore, close inter-social relations, and eccentric individualities. For these the indispensable conditions of existence are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation."*

What I found at Richardson was the beginning of just that local condition of which Hardy is speaking. The few gold-rush survivors, men and women, could not have been living in the area for more than fifty years, but in their memories and the stories they told, full of

*Preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy, 1902.

humor and spite, already the place had begun to acquire the dimensions of myth. Each of the persons I came to know before the last of them died in the late 1960's, had a clarity of outline, a distinctiveness of temperament, that only simplicity and a certain isolation allow human character. For the first time in my life I became aware of individuals, of persons in all their quirkiness and singularity. I was fortunate indeed, because this condition of things has by now nearly vanished from American life, and all life begins to take on the same bland mediocrity one finds so plentifully in the suburbs. It may be true, as I sometimes believe, that this change has been more than just a sign of deterioration in social life. In order for a new form of life to occupy a place, another must die. When our imaginations have grown enough, perhaps we will understand that for us the local must some day include the continent, and finally the planet itself. Nothing else will allow us to thrive as a species. But it is also true that meanwhile we are painfully aware that a way of living has disappeared, leaving an empty place in our lives.

It would be easy to say that something of the cold and clarity of the land, and much of the rest of what I have been talking about, just somehow got into the poems I wrote while I lived there. In a way this is true, but it is more than that, and other than. It was an awakening, profound and disturbing. Everything was so new to me that it was like finding myself for the first time with my feet on the earth. I began to see, and to the extent that it was possible for me, I entered the original mystery of things, the great past out of which we came. I saw the mid-winter sun sink in a cleft of the mountains to the south, and felt I had learned a great secret. The winter solstice was an actual event, and it came on with a menace and grandeur not to be put aside by mere magic.

But most important, as I have already suggested, was the meeting of place and dream. Without my being entirely conscious of it, this place and this life were what I had wanted more than any other thing. All doors seemed to open there; things hidden away, brooded upon for years, came to life. The owls I sketched as a child, the grass flowing on the hillside, the lynx track in the snow. An example of this might be seen in the poem "Book Of The Jungle" from *Winter News*. When I was five or six years old, my father read to me on winter evenings from Kipling's *Jungle Books*. Something took shape there in my mind: the wolf in the mouth of the cave, ready for the night's

hunting, the forest coming awake, and far away, the village of men.
Thirty years went by, and that shape surfaced in a poem.

The animal, rising at dusk
from its bed in the trampled
grass—
 this is how it all began.

Far off the shaggy tribesmen
listened and fed their fires
with thorns.

Secret paths of the forest,
when did your children walk
unarmed, clothed only
with the shadow of leaves?

We are still kneeling
and listening; as from the edge
of a neglected field
there rises sometimes at evening
the snort of a rutting bull.

Poetry seems to have been a natural response to my living there. My first winter in the cabin at Richardson, unable for some reason to paint, I began attempting poems in which I could express some of my feeling for this place I was coming to know, amazed at all I was seeing and learning. The poems were not, of course, very good. I had a lot to learn, about writing and about myself. For me to really know the place, I had to live there, build there, become intimate with it, and to know it for a long time, before I could say anything about it that would be personal and distinctive. It was nearly ten years before I wrote anything that satisfied me.

On that hillside, remote from many distractions, it was possible for me to see things, all things, more clearly, and to think in a quiet hard to come by these days. The events of my life seemed to reach into both past and future. Sometimes on fall evenings, looking out on that great

valley, the route of migrations, I saw, or felt, a future invasion of the continent; some force out of Asia, as in the not so remote past. In the poem "Foreboding" I tried to say something about this, a kind of vision, or suggestion of something not yet here.

Something immense and lonely
divides the earth at evening.

For nine years I have watched
from an inner doorway:
as in a confused vision,
manlike figures approach, cover
their faces, and pass on,
heavy with iron and distance.

There is no sound but the wind
crossing the road, filling
the ruts with a dust as fine as chalk.

Like the closing of an inner door,
the day begins its dark
journey, across nine bridges
wrecked one by one.

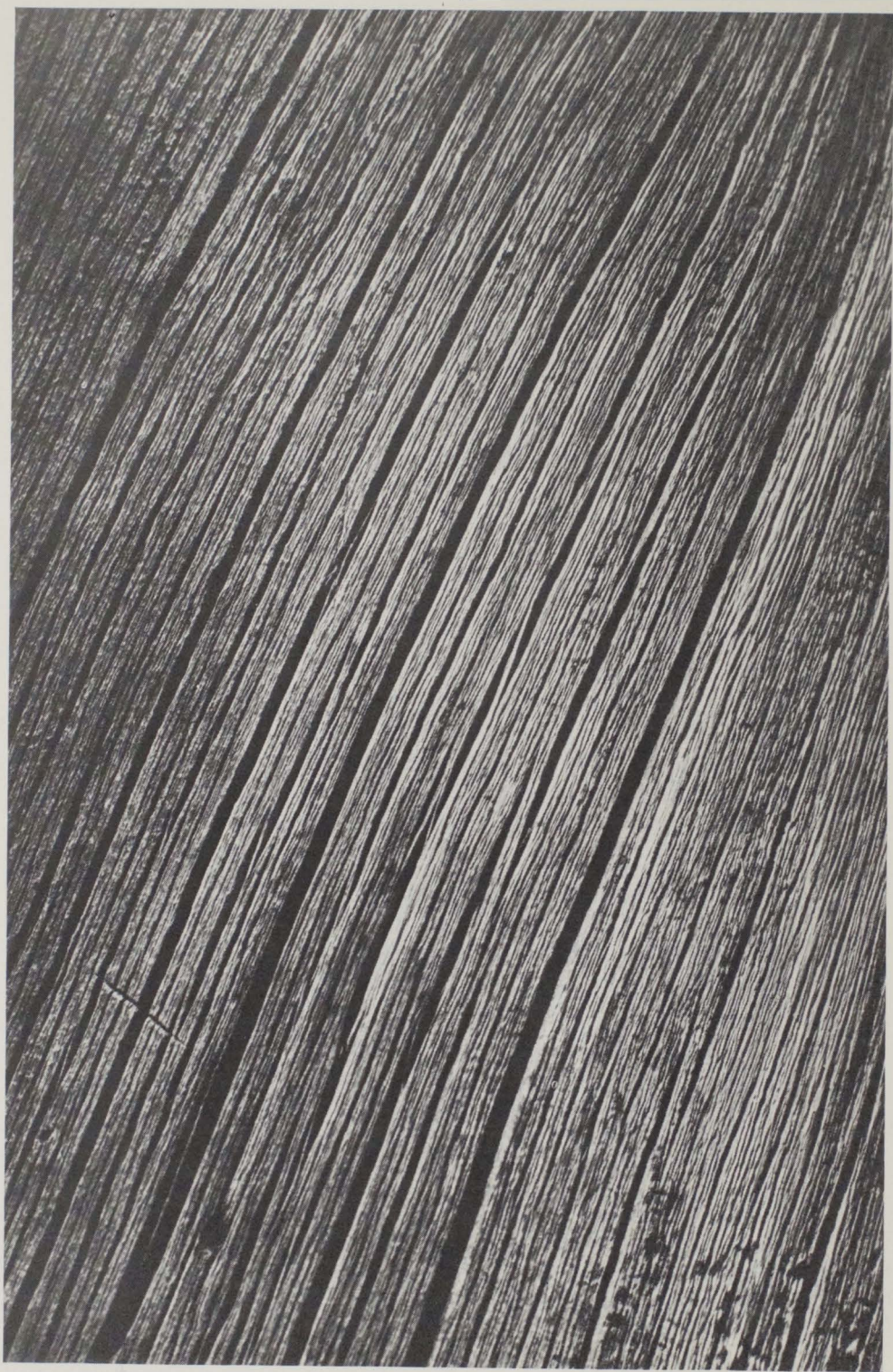
I hope it will be clearer from this brief description how much and in what ways those years at Richardson formed me as a person and as a writer. There is one part of it I have hardly mentioned, and that concerns the two women who lived there with me much of the time, and one in particular. It seems only honest in an account of this sort not to have it appear that I was alone all the time, or that whatever was done I did all by myself. Without the companionship and support, physical and emotional, it seems unlikely that I would have got through those years, deprived as in some ways they were. And it seems to me not the least of things that I did finally learn to live with another human being.

It is still a place I go back to, in mind and in spirit, though it seems I cannot go back to it in fact. The material it gave me is still a part of my life, and I go back to it in poems, and in prose, trying to understand as well as I can the significance of what happened to me there. The

experience was so powerful it has influenced everything else I have done. Probably I measure everything else against it. Of all things I have and am, it is something I do not lose. While writing parts of this essay I could see on a table before me a broken sandstone seed mortar that I dug up from a field in California a few years ago. When I found it I was out early in the morning, looking at some Indian rock paintings not far from where I was camped with my wife and a group of school children. Such things, and the landscapes of which they are part, would not have for me the significance they do if I had not explored for myself during those years in Alaska something of the original life of the continent.

I no longer live at Richardson. In more ways than one, perhaps, that life is gone. Place for me has shifted from the Northcountry wilderness to a house in suburban California; from there to some rocks in the arid California foothills, to the rainy outlines of a city in the northwest, and from there to a windy street in Missoula, Montana. But behind all I write there is a landscape, partly idealized, perhaps, against which the human figure, my own or another's, acts out a part of its life. That original place still sustains me. It gave me a way of looking at the world I might not have got otherwise, and not least, a solitude in which I could learn to listen to my own voice. But as I have tried to show, I do not think place, outer place, alone can account for this. There must be another place, and that is within the person himself. When that interior place, formed out of dream and fantasy, and by intense imagination, finds its counterpart in a physical landscape, then some genuine human reality can be created.

The homestead at Richardson provided a place of departure, from which I might go out into the world as on a journey. I think it is in the idea of the journey that one of the important metaphors of our time can be found, the journey out of wilderness into culture, the forms of our complicated and corrupted age, with its intense confusions and deceptions. The eventual disintegration of these cultural forms returns us once more to the wilderness. This journey can be seen as both fall and reconciliation. And place, once again, means actual place, but also a state of mind, of consciousness. Once that place is established, we carry it with us, as we do a sense of ourselves.



PLUGGING THE HOLE IN THE BUCKET

(John Haines interviewed by Bob Wrigley)

INT: In your essay, "The Hole in the Bucket," you say right off: "Our poetry lacks ideas."

JH: It's difficult to define what we mean by "ideas" in poetry, though I tried to do that at one point in the essay, that I meant among other things a conviction about the world and the place of poetry in it; a certain perception, or way of seeing, something that *might* be abstracted and stated as an *idea*, but not necessarily. I think I was asking for a kind of seriousness, and my complaint was maybe a reflection of the general condition of things today, that we have few convictions about anything, and little motivation other than just getting away with whatever we can, ripping off the rewards. Possibly the same thing is true of poetry. You don't need ideas if we have a big network of presses and magazines, and you can imitate one of the going styles successfully enough. You won't need any ideas, not to get published anyway. It seems obvious to me you will need them if you are going to grow. You will need ideas (content might be a better word), convictions about something. I still think that's true.

INT: Where do the poet's ideas come from? Not great philosophical ideas.

JH: If a poet writes long enough he will come into them out of necessity. Otherwise his entire life will be spent in a series of random accomplishments of one sort or another. I think it will be almost an instinct, a basic urge in an artist to pull together what he has seen and what he has learned, and see if he can't make something coherent out of it. He might not be able to spell it out in philosophical terms, but it will begin to assume some kind of order and clarity. I should think he would want it to. There are poets who have written over a long period of time of whom that's probably not true. And there

have been people whose ideas peter out; they don't get any more ideas and keep on writing the same poem. I think the poet's ideas come from a variety of sources, not necessarily acquired from philosophy or religion or science, put to use in poems. Though, strictly speaking, what's wrong with that? There are all sorts of ideas, discoveries floating around these days, but we don't make any use of them. Possibly the best ideas just grow out of the work. A poet sees that his response to the world has taken a certain pattern and from that he may abstract something—for himself, anyway—that becomes a working principle. So that what he wrote twenty years ago relates to what he is doing now. If we read Williams we can see his ideas about the language slowly maturing. And this leads him on to do something else, to write *Paterson*. It all holds together. I think that's important. I think these ideas are important. It doesn't mean people can't write poems without them, but it seems to me they are important.

INT: Is this lack of "ideas" a general indictment of the entire body of contemporary poetry?

JH: No. I was speaking in a very general sense. I knew that and said so. Well, who is there among us who has ideas? I'm not sure that I know. Well, Wendell Berry writes out of a certain attitude toward things; our relationship to the land, a certain kind of life that is appropriate for people. How original that is, I don't know; it has a considerable ancestry in people like Thoreau. But it gives Berry's work a focus and coherence. I'm not sure what ideas Bill Stafford has, but he also seems to have a certain slant on existence that you could call an idea if you wanted to. I don't think there are many people writing in this country of whom this is true. I suppose it could be true of Bly. Maybe in Bly's case, the ideas are just in the way. He has ideas about the sort of poetry we should be writing, and he tries to write poems out of that.

I felt very strongly about what I said in that essay, but another way of putting the whole thing might be this. I was asking myself if *I* had any ideas, and if not, why not. Or if I have, what are they? It's been helpful to me to think this way, and if someone else reads that essay and thinks "Ah! That's right. Do I have any ideas?" then I will have accomplished at least a part of what I set out to. Such questions, even though they seem a bit larger or outrageous, can be valuable to anyone.

INT: You also say that the lack of ideas extends into criticism too.

JH: We have a lot of people reviewing books of poetry today, but very few of them have any ideas of what poetry ought to be. I cannot think of anyone, except Bly sometimes. I find most reviews of poetry boring simply because I don't discover any real point of view in them. They don't tell me anything, and are no help in thinking about poetry. If a person has strong, passionate feelings about an art and can say them with enough conviction, they take on the form of an idea. I'm not sure to this day how coherent Yeats' ideas were, but he had some. The work seems to make sense, to hang together. Maybe you can take the ideas and throw them away. They aren't important; but the poetry is there anyway. The ideas served as a scaffolding, if nothing else. It's too much to ask of hundreds of contemporary poets that they all have ideas. One in a hundred might have a real idea.

INT: A lot of people, a lot of poets I should say, Donald Hall and Robert Bly for example, blame some of the mediocrity they see in contemporary poetry on writing workshops and MFA programs. What do you think?

JH: I think they may encourage the sameness or mediocrity. It's possible that such an environment, if the description is at all accurate, tends to discourage real ideas because those ideas threaten the status quo. I don't know that this is true, but I suspect it is. I don't know what one does to change that.

INT: Is the whole idea of workshops wrong somehow?

JH: We had good poets before anyone started the workshops. The poets today aren't any better, we just have more of them. I don't think poetry needs the workshop. If you are a poet, you will write poems—murder will out. If you want to go to school, go to school with the best writers you can find, by *reading* them. But on the other hand, possibly the workshops, looked at in the right way, are not a matter of making poets out of people or anything like that, but of creating an environment in which it is possible to think about poetry and talk about it, as we might not be able to do otherwise. An audience, though I think the university-sponsored writing group is a somewhat limited and artificial response. It certainly doesn't touch the community at large.

INT: Bly says that they teach people how to get poems in *The New Yorker* and that's it.

JH: Or, how to get poems into magazines, period. To the extent that anyone is encouraged to think that merely because he or she has a few poems accepted and has been praised for them, that he or she has really arrived at the threshold, has "made it," someone is being dishonest.

INT: A false sense of importance. "Me and William Butler Yeats are both poets." You said before that some poets ignore the important figures of the past because they don't seem related to what is being published now. Do you think workshops encourage that kind of thinking?

JH: Something about people who don't read much poetry, only what is current, in the air at the moment? I saw something in the paper this morning about the decline of interest in history as a subject. People aren't interested in reading about the past. Current events, that takes the place of history. And I wonder about the reasons for this. Charles Fair describes the situation, and explains it better than I could. He describes the kind of person typical today, someone who is not interested in the principles, the ideas that have brought about the

civilization we have. They are disconnected from it, untouched by it, almost. They have the products, the results, and use them without thought. You know, we have all this stuff, for example tape recorders, hi-fi, we can listen to Beethoven and Fleetwood Mac at the same time. It all comes to us so easily, and we don't think what it took to make this possible. What use is history? We have what we have, and we don't need it. We are rather like spoiled heirs. Anyway, if this is true, and I think it is—Ortega said much the same thing years ago—then we might say that something like this is also true of poetry today. And it is possible that the workshops, by making it easy for people to write and publish, do encourage this—a product everywhere much the same.

INT: And of course, as I'm sure Fair points out, that applies to practically all of contemporary life. Someone can say: "This is my life. This is all that's important."

JH: Yeah. If I say it's good, it's good. Why should I read all that stuff, anyway? There have been periods when art seems to have been a sort of community undertaking, the individual talent wasn't all that important. Probably the Middle Ages would be a good example. Those carvings on the cathedrals; some of them may have been signed by individual craftsmen, but on the whole it was a kind of mass effort. But for us literature has been mainly the individual talent or genius impressing itself on the language in such a way that the style was unmistakable. Someone has used the language, filled it with passion and thought, and left an indelible mark on it. When we don't find this, we find pretty much a standardized product. One poem by so-and-so reads pretty much like a poem by someone else. I don't think it's possible to claim that we have a worthwhile literature under those conditions, but a lot of stuff will eventually sift out and a few good poems will survive this period. I think they will because there are some good people writing.

INT: I've heard you quote Radcliffe Squires on the Italian poet, Mario Luzi—a very interesting quote. He said: "Ninety percent of the poetry today fails . . ."

JH: "fails to make anything of experience for the simple reason that it makes everything of experience, so that experience becomes not the tutor but a kind of trivial tyrant." This seems clear to me. It goes right along with some of the things Fair has been saying in *APR*, and elsewhere, about the loss of imagination. If I understand Squires, I think that's what he's talking about. We have hundreds of poems today that tell us all kinds of day to day things about the poet, his girl copped out, something red flushed down the drain. "Today I took out my teeth." I'm oversimplifying it, but it is the ability to take that bit of personal experience and go beyond it that finally makes literature. Really fine writers are able to write about things they haven't themselves experienced because they have the ability to take the bit of personal reality given to them and expand it, make it into something much larger and inclusive. It's a quality of mind we call "imagination". If Fair is right, that this is being lost, and I think he may be right, then perhaps there is no point in blaming the writers themselves. The problem is so much bigger than that, and the poverty of the writing is simply a manifestation of the general condition of society. What to do about that I don't know. Wasn't it Kafka who said about World War I, that it was caused by a great lack of imagination? But perhaps one can deal with it in poetry by recognizing that the situation does exist, instead of pretending that it doesn't.

It seems to me that one of the things we can do is to learn from the past. Pound said in one of his early poems, speaking of his songs, that he wanted them to "stand in the hard Sophoclean light" and take their wounds from it gladly. That's the attitude of a serious artist. I think it is the only way you can learn and grow. And it can be very saddening to find that your own work just doesn't measure up. I may be wrong, but I think many people are not willing to take that risk. It's much simpler to be praised and have your poems compared to someone over in the next state who writes pretty much like yourself. You can feel pretty good about that; you don't have to ask yourself those hard questions. You needn't put your poems next to Yeats and have to say, "Jesus, what a slob I am."

INT: You said that the really good writers don't necessarily have to experience what they write about. James Dickey calls this the "creative possibility of the lie."

JH: Sure it's a form of lying; if you like, a creative lie. But the intention is to transform reality, or what we like to call reality. We need a very strict sense of aesthetic morality, to know that the facts must be altered in order to reveal another reality, one that lies behind appearances. We do it all the time when we write. Why write a poem if all you want to do is relate the facts? The power to select and transform convincingly and consistently is what makes the artist.

INT: You used to paint and study painting, but then you moved to poetry. How did that come about exactly? Was there a point when you said: I'm a poet, not a painter?

JH: I'm not sure of all the psychological apparatus that went into that.

INT: There was no gong that went off or something . . .

JH: No it wasn't like that. What happened was that I went to Alaska in 1947. I was going to art school in Washington at the time, and took a year and a half off to go north. That first winter, somewhere past mid-winter, I thought I would try to paint. I got out my stuff, some canvas I had with me, stretchers, and paint. But for some reason I could not get into paint what I was feeling about the place. It just didn't feel right, and I don't know why. So I began writing poems instead. It turned out to be a very free and natural outflow of feelings and impressions concerning what I had so far seen there. That was in 1948. I left Alaska that fall and went back to Washington and art school once more. I got very involved with painting and with sculpture the next year, but I kept on writing poems, and more importantly reading a lot of modern poetry I hadn't known before. A real conflict came of this. I had excruciating headaches that I didn't relate to anything at the time. When I moved to New York in 1950, I came to a decision at the same time to give up art and be a poet, as good

a one as I could. The headaches stopped at the same time. I kept on with art school because it gave me the GI allowance to live on, but even though I went to school and did some work there, I never again painted. It was a conscious and deliberate decision, not arrived at without considerable searching and pain. I don't remember the exact date, it was sometime in January or February, 1950. All my friends were painters, except one or two writers I met, among them Weldon Kees, who was very much involved with the art world in New York at the time. This was the world I moved in. I spent much of my time writing, but hardly ever showed the poems to anyone. And of course the poems weren't very good. I had a lot to learn. Why I made that decision, the kind that changes one's life forever, I am not sure. From time to time I've considered reasons for it, and even stated them, but finally I have to admit I can't be sure. There were certain practical considerations that may or may not have been valid.

INT: Then it was roughly sixteen years between the time you decided to write and the publication of the first book. That's a long time.

JH: Is that right? 1950 to 1966—God, yes. I took a long time to publish, didn't I? Not that it was deliberate, but that's the way it worked out. I suppose it's unfair to cite my own experience and claim this is the way it should be for all. But I think now there is something to be said for time and ripeness. Some people must think they will be the great exception and, like Dylan Thomas or Keats or Rimbaud, flower with the first touch of adolescence. But I don't think any of us can count on being that. Certainly it's been true for others, Stafford, for example, that a long period of apprenticeship lies waiting. This is a private matter, and isn't undertaken in any workshop. It is between you and the universe, with the aid of the literary tradition, those writers from whom you learn and for whom you have respect. And out of all that, if you're lucky, someday will come a thing that is entirely your own. It might happen in a longer or shorter time, but there's nothing

really lost by being patient. The seriousness that attracts me can't be pushed. It arrives when it must. You can force things in a hothouse. Maybe that's what a workshop is, a hothouse.

INT: Bill Knott said recently that we shouldn't criticize anyone for publishing less than he or she is capable of writing, for publishing crap, as it were, because we don't know for sure if we'll be around tomorrow. The world may be blown to bits before we get a chance to write our next poem. Is that a defensible excuse?

JH: It seems to me a very poor excuse for publishing bad work. If things are that bad, what's the point of publishing at all? Unless it's a matter of getting what you can while there is still time, making a dogpile out of it, the way they do in business. But to hear it rationalized in literature that way is unpleasant. I don't have it here with me now, but Jeffers wrote an essay about things like that. He was encouraging the young poet not to be in a hurry; that finally the only judgement that mattered was beyond the person's control, other than his ability to produce good, honest work. The judgements were going to be made sometime in the future, not now. The only sort of praise worth having, according to Jeffers, was that which would still be given a few hundred years from now. If your work has that quality, it will survive. And he said that having any other audience in mind was a distraction because you would always be tempted to write things to please that audience. Anyway, it seems like pretty good advice to me, if a little extreme and no doubt not easy to follow. We need some standards of excellence in our head so we will know what good poems are. If those standards are good enough that we can read a poem from ancient Greece and know that it *is* good, there's no reason to think the standards have changed. The same aesthetic or critical sense that allows us to feel that a poem today is good or not good, and the same sense of fitness is going to be valid another thousand years from now.

INT: You're getting your rewards now.

JH: I am. But it's all incidental. They have come to me, but I sure



didn't go out looking for them. There's no money in it, or not much, but if you mean recognition, praise . . . it's nice to have. It probably hasn't anything to do with whether I'll write a good poem tomorrow or the next week. Such rewards as I've got, and I suppose that includes the right to publish what I write . . . even if it's bad, someone will probably take it because it has my name on it. And on the basis of all this I get a job now and then. But I say it is incidental because they have come from having paid attention to something else, and done the best work I could.

INT: Williams Matthews recently spoke of you and your work in a magazine interview. It was great praise, particularly for *Winter News*.

JH: It still surprises me that *Winter News* did mean a lot to a number of people. I am only beginning to understand what it meant and why it still seems important. When I go back into that book today, it is a little like entering another country.

INT: You feel your work has changed that much in nine years?

JH: The voice is the same, but I have changed, and the person who wrote those poems sometimes seems ages away. It's a bit like going back to a house you lived in as a child and finding everything changed, grown smaller.

INT: I'm sure some of that feeling comes from having left Alaska, wouldn't you say?

JH: It comes from having left not only Alaska, but the person I was when I lived there. This has been a very strange thing to me—possibly a journey of some kind, as I have tried to say elsewhere. I relate to the poems in *Winter News* as poems, but it is almost as if they were written by another person. It is me, and yet it is not.

INT: The earlier poems were pared down. There was nothing like fat.

JH: There was no fat on me, either! The poems in *Winter News*, the language of the poems, came directly out of the environment and the life I was living. It was a life pared to essentials. There was no room for excess. Well, I needed that kind of discipline. I may have picked up a certain amount of baggage since then, I don't know. Certainly the environment has changed, and I have lived through considerable confusion, subject to all kinds of things from within and without. The clarity or crispness of the earlier poems may not be there now, at least not to the extent that it was. But you know, I wouldn't like to feel I had lost that for good.

INT: In a short review of *The Stone Harp* and *Twenty Poems* that appeared in *Stinktree*, Robert Bly said: "An alienation, deep, has slipped in overnight, the human community seems to him unworthy, a hostility toward it, subtle, like the cold coming from a wrench left outdoors overnight, moves into the hand, and into the air. He finds it hard even to love animals, though he prefers them to human beings." And he goes on to say that you have not "lived out" your own life, but rather that of the "dream of a disintegrating community." How about it? Is/was your alienation so acute that you felt yourself superior to, or at least outside of the rest of mankind?

JH: I had come out of a world in which I had discovered something completely fresh and new, and that was the arctic, the north. I had made it my own, and I felt at home in it. I left that and re-entered contemporary society which I believe now is far more corrupt than I ever thought it was. To some extent, perhaps, that discovery has destroyed some of the freshness of my own feeling about the world. I see what we have done, and what is being done, and it has been like a slow catastrophe. The alienation Bly speaks of was for me a true finding. It was real. The alienation *is* there. Alienation from the original perception of things and alienation, finally, from oneself. I feel it everywhere I go, even in Montana, one looks at the world and realizes it has been touched. Things have been done to it. I didn't have that feeling about the far north.

INT: Did you have much problem in getting back into the populated world? Coming back from Alaska?

JH: Yeah. Superficially, I learned to adjust to things here. I learned to drive on freeways, that took me quite a while. There were constant little collisions between myself and the world I found here. It has been difficult. Disorienting might be the word for it.

INT: Did this cause any changes in your writing? The reason I ask is that there are certainly more people in your poems now, especially in *Leaves and Ashes*. You're writing poems now, about your family, about the people for whom you feel some intimacy.

JH: Yes, I think that's true. Initially I tried to keep the style or tone of the poems in *Winter News*, and write out of a completely new situation and subject matter. I suppose that was inevitable, but it made some problems. Some of the poems in *The Stone Harp* and *Leaves and Ashes* are that sort. I had to loosen up, and change in some way to accommodate a new kind of experience. That took time. The great thing about having left Alaska and come back here has been the re-encounter with parts of myself I had forgotten. It has allowed me to include people, individuals, not only in my life, but in the poems, in a way I never have before. This is probably the best thing that's happened. *Winter News*, you know, was a pretty self-contained world, and having lived that out, what else could I do with it? It easily became a confinement. I had to break out of it, and leaving Alaska was my way of doing that.

INT: I'd say you have maintained the style. You have always had the same consistent voice throughout all the books.

JH: That may be true . . . perhaps the changes aren't so much in style, but simply changes in attention, and in the number and kinds of things I could respond to and write about.

INT: You're writing more prose now, essays and the like. And some pieces that have been a sort of weaving together of prose and poetry, like the thing for Bill Heyen's new anthology.

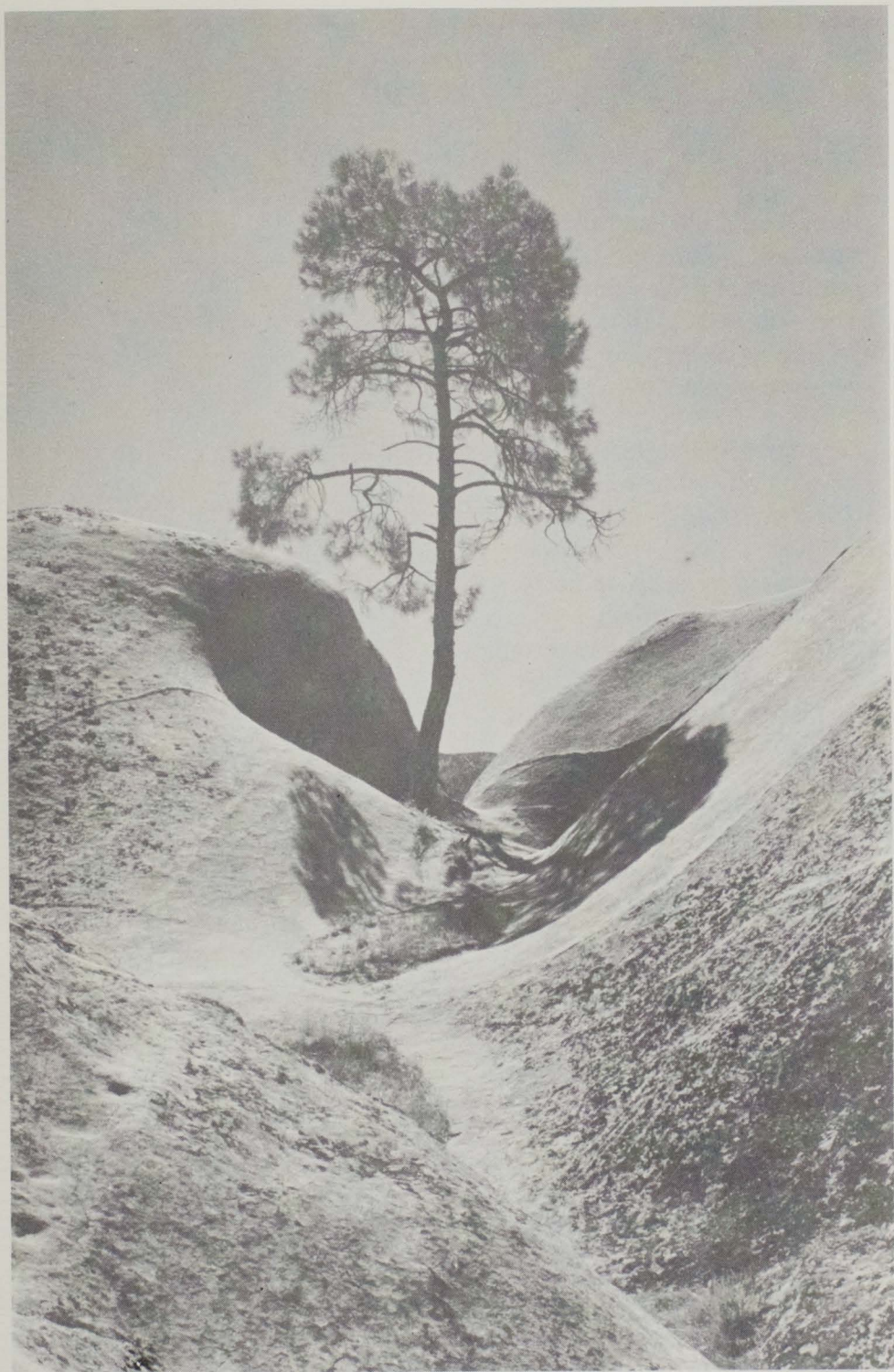
JH: Partly I guess, there are things I want to say at greater length; or in some way I can't in poetry. Among other things, the kind of essay you are talking about that I did for Heyen's anthology.

INT: What's it like writing about your own work?

JH: Well, I thought I wouldn't like it, but I found that it allowed me to write about the situation some of the poems came from, and to tell a story. Not so much how I came to write down my first lines, that sort of thing, which is mostly bullshit. But to explore some of the background of the poems, and talk about them in a way that, for myself, made an entirely new thing. I don't think of it so much as writing about my poems as writing about the experiences the poems came from. For me they still have a lot of interest, a lot of possibilities. I wrote a poem about Fred Campbell, "Deserted Cabin", in which I think I gave pretty much the essence of the man and his life. But there is still so much fascination for me in that person and the way he lived. I want to go into it in more detail. This wouldn't be a poem, it would be a story. As long as I feel this kind of interest in the material, I'll want to write about it.

INT: Do you think you might write long poems? Your poems are not usually long . . .

JH: I don't know that I'll ever write a *really* long poem. I used to think I wanted to, and sometimes think I may still. I still have scraps of long poems, epics of life at Richardson. Scraps of conversation mixed with lyric passages, pieces of journals and letters and so forth. I had it all planned out, but never wrote it. I didn't know how at the time, and I may never do it that way now. But there is another way, I think, partly prose and partly verse. I think I might be able to do that if the interest holds. Who knows?



DRIVING THROUGH OREGON (Dec. 1973)

New Year's Eve, and all through
the state of Oregon
we found the gas pumps dry,
the stalls shuttered, the vague
windmills of the shopping malls
stopped on the hour.

The homebound traffic thinned,
turning off by the roadside;
I lost count of abandoned cars.

This is the country we knew
before the cities came,
lighted by sun, moon and stars,
the glare of a straying comet,
the spark from a hunting fire
flying in the prairie wind.

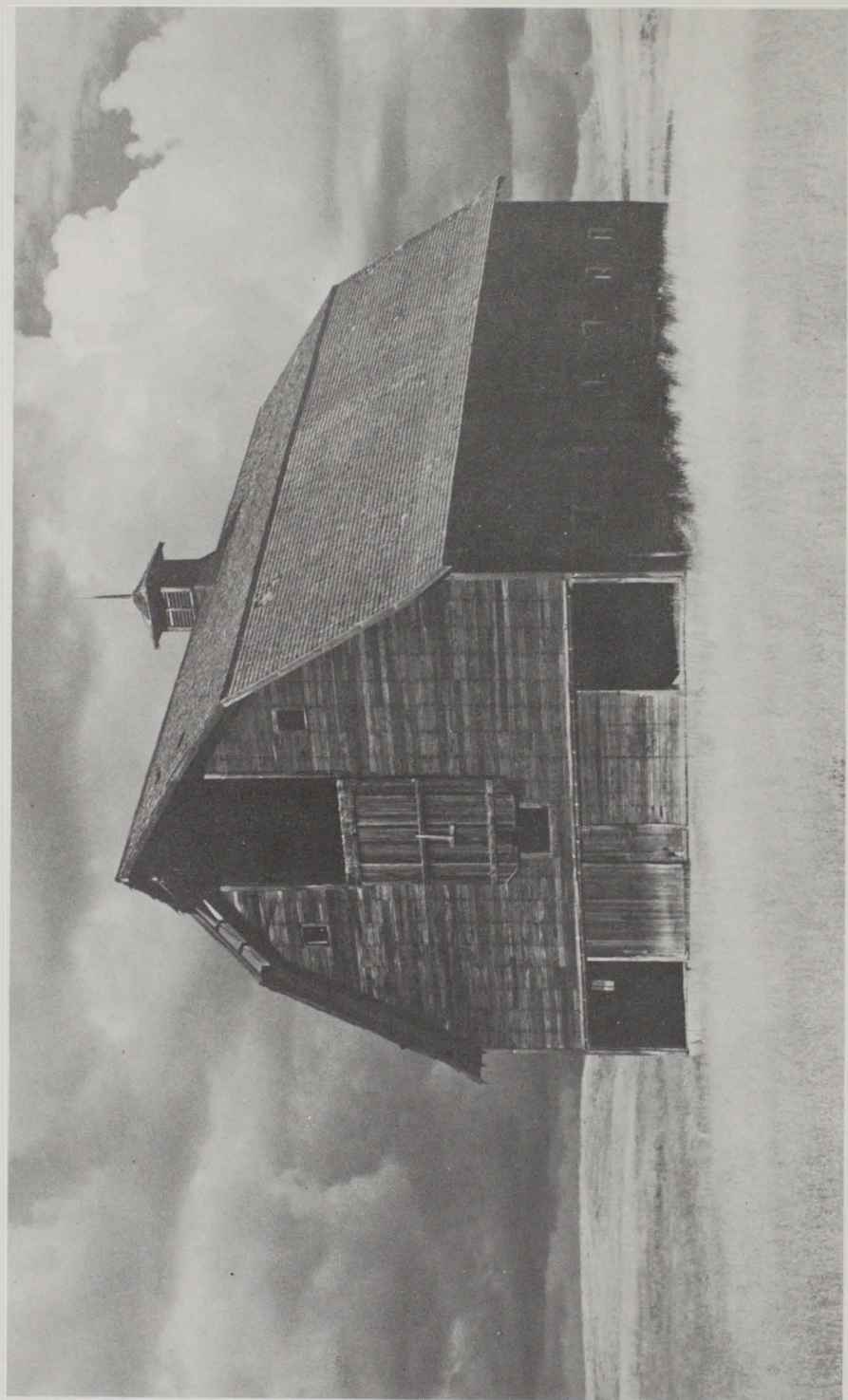
The long land darkens, houselights
wink green and gold,
more distant than the planets
in fields bound with invisible wire.

We will drive this road to the end,
another Sunday, another year;
past the rainy borders of Canada,
the wind-shorn taiga,
to the shore of the Great White Bear;

and stop there, stalled in a drift
by the last well
drained for a spittle of oil.

The driver sleeps, the passenger listens:
Tick, tick from a starlit engine,
snow beginning again
deep in a continent vacant and dark.





HOMESTEAD

I

It is nearly thirty years
since I came over Richardson Hill
to pitch a bundle of boards
in the dark, light my fire
and stir with a spoon
old beans in a blackened pot.

II

What did I come for? To see
the shadows waver and leap,
listen to water,
birds in their sleep,
the tremor in old men's voices.

The land gave up its meaning slowly,
as the sun finds day by day
a deeper place in the mountain.

III

Green smoke and white ash,
the split wood smelling of honey.

And the skinned carcass of a fox
flung red in the snow, frost
flowering in the blue, flawed glass—
these are the images.

The canvas tent-wall warmed
by a candle, my halfway house
of flies on summer evenings.

IV

One morning in my first winter
I met a tall man set apart
by the crazy cunning in his stare.

From him by tallow light
I heard his tales of Richardson
and Tenderfoot, names and antics
of the pathfinders and squawmen,
Jesus-workers, quick whores.

I followed where his hand
made a hill or a hollow,
saw their mark on the land,
the grass-grown scars,
fallen bailiwicks, and heaps
of iron scaling in the birches.

These shadows came and went.
One still September day
I knew their passing
left no more sound in the land
than a handful of berries
tumbled in a miner's pail.

V

From the spent dream behind me,
the Dakotas, reeling Montana . . .
came grass fires, and
a black hand mowing the plains.

The floor of the sky littered
with shackled farms,
dust through the window cracks,
a locust cloud eating the harvest.

California, pillar of sandstone,
Oregon still vaguely green—
these are the images.

And now on the high tundra,
willows and water without end,
come shade and a song like death.

VI

Old ladders shorten, pulled down
in the sod, half-rotted houselogs
heaved by the frost; my hand
spans the distance I have come.

Out of a passion turned searing
and blind, like a theme
of bitter smoke, a deep blow
strikes at the granite roots.

By oil-light and the glint of coal,
forcing its way,
a rougher spirit invades the land,
this ruin carved by a plow.

VII

Here is the place I came to,
the lost bridge, my steep camp
nailed to this hillside, by a road
that trails out of nowhere.

I walk here evenings when the light
clears after rain, and a thrush song
soars in the birch grove.

A door blows aside in the wind,
and a path worn deep to the spring
showers familiar leaves.

A battered dipper shines here
in the dusk; the trees stand close,
their branches are moving,
in flight with the rustling of wings.



THINGS. . .

For a long time now
we have heard these voices
singing along eroded wires,
murmurs from the veiled partitions
of clouds, little whispers
tracing the dust. . .

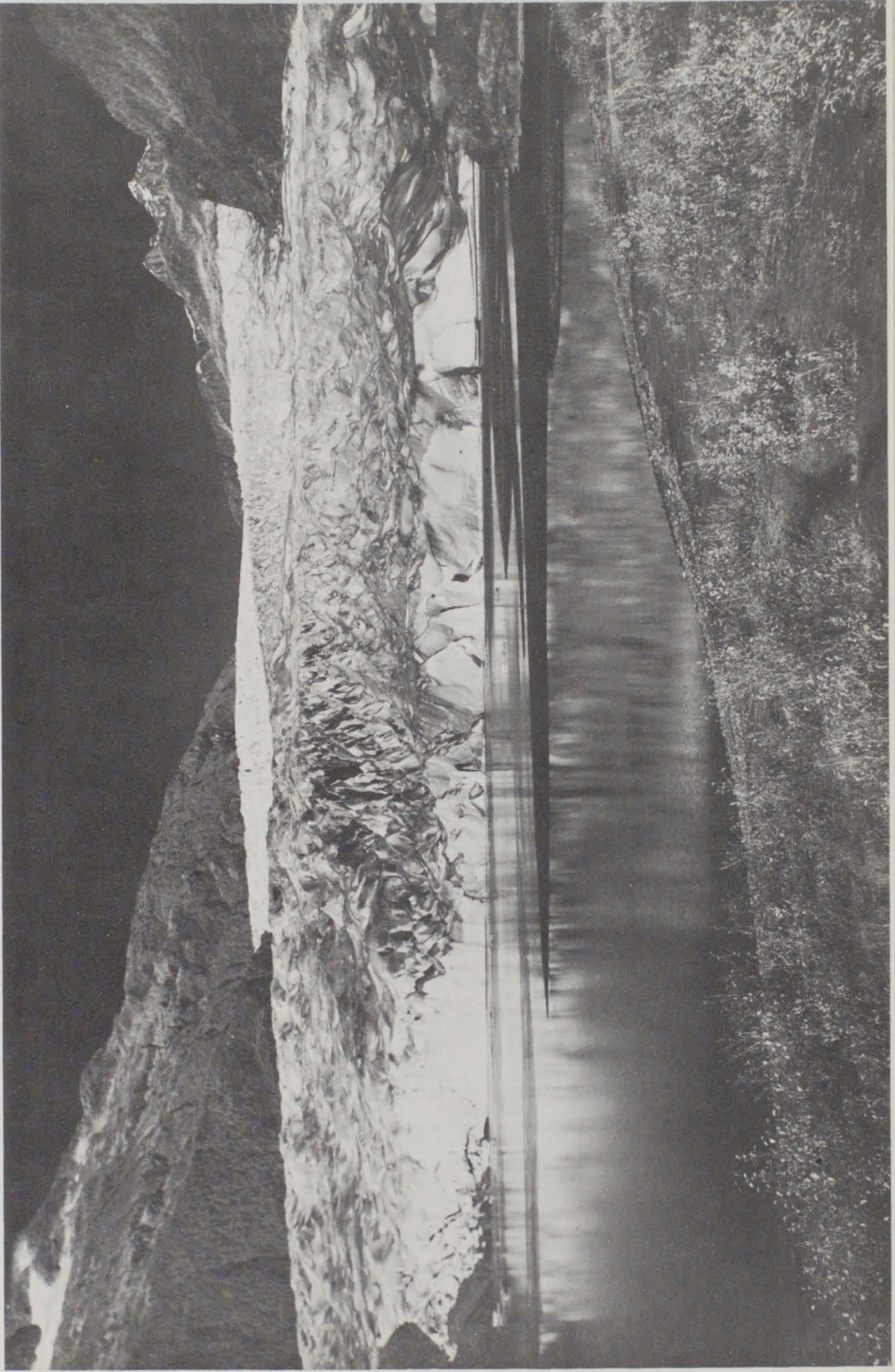
They tell us what we partly know,
hidden by the noise we make:
the land will not forgive us.

Crushed and broken things,
shapes of clay and burning lignite,
come from the soil of the plains
and speak to us their words in smoke—
the hawk of the nightmare
is flying again.

The past returns in the lightning
of horses's manes, iron shoes
striking sparks from the pavement;
in the idleness of men who circle
the night with their sliding ropes.

Everything we have known for so long,
a house at ease, a calm street
to walk on, and sunset
in which the fire means us no harm. . .

Rolling back from the blocked summit
like an uncoupled train
with no hand on the brake,
gathering speed in the dark
on the mountain grade.



NEWS FROM THE GLACIER

I

That mid-fall morning, driving north
toward Glacier Park,
we came down into Flathead Lake
to find a world of mist:

an inland sea rolled in by night,
spreading across the valley,
lapping the hillsides.

As if we had slept a long time,
more than a thousand years,
and awakened, the world we came from
known by these vague fossils
held still in the fog:

grey masts of the pine trees,
the half-roofs of barns and houses,
cattle standing asleep
in an air like water.

Nothing living or awake;
no wind, no sound,
and the light drained of color.

II

Sunlight struck before us
at Marias Pass.

A pack train loading
by the roadside, horses
and red-shirted men
standing in the chill;

three mules already loaded,
roped and bound uphill,
splashing the icy shallows.

Like figures held over
from the day of stampedes
and vigilantes, another light
than this sun glinting
on the barrels and buckles.

Their tents still half
in the morning shadow,
smoke from that fire
winding up to the ridges,
thinning before the hunters . . .

And out of the sunlit,
steaming grass before us
a coyote bounded—

gone in the smoky thickets.

III

We climbed all afternoon
up Avalanche Creek,
following a track in thin snow,
over roots, and loose stone
tunneled by water;

and came near evening
to a small, half-frozen lake
held in a cirque.

Snow was the dust on those peaks;
at the lake's far end
an orange tent
blazed in the mountain shadow.

I sent a stone skittering over
the ice, that made a sound
like a creature that cries in the dusk,
warning of night and the cold.

And we stood and listened
in the silence that echoed after,
to know what cried,
what bird, what thing that was.



IV

Nine thousand feet in the Rockies,
staring into the blue vault,
we saw a cloud
form out of vapor and wind . . .

Swiftly a hurrying whiteness
spilled from the rock ledge
above us, and plunged,
terrace by terrace,
tearing itself into rain
and mist . . .

As if a whole summer held back
in the desolation of the sky
had spent itself,
foam and radiant bubble;

to lie regathered, quiet,
a blue pool staining
the yellow rock at our feet.

V

West of Logan Pass, where
the snow held back another hour . . .

The mountain goats came down,
out of the cliffs above us,
down from their pasture
of sedges and lichen.

Small groups of them, bound
for water, shelter from storm;
snowdrops, small clouds
bringing their shadows to earth.

And seeing the people there
below them, they stopped
and quietly grazed out of sight
in a thorny thicket.

All but one old billy
who stood alone on the ridge,
his beard in the wind,
watching the watchers who
waited and stamped their feet.

We left them feeding
in the windy darkness
and went down, slowly
descending in loops of stone,
while the mountain turned
slowly white behind us.

VI

On a bend in the road near St. Mary
the rock wall gave back to us
the eroded shape of a whale,
something part fish or reptile
stranded here when the seas went down
and the mountains lifted.

Slowly the meat rotted, then water
came back, and sand piled again
on the windy skeleton.

Far above us in the remote divide
there are seams of sediment
packed with little shells,
stone surf breaking green and rose
in the high snow air.

The deep lake of the west is gone,
only this beached leviathan
sleeping here in the rock wall
slowly turns on the wide earth bed.

That spine has changed to quartz,
the bleached bones break
into fragments that cut our fingers.

VII

Toward Many Glaciers,
where the granite coiled
in a gritty pattern,
like the thumbwhorl of a giant
imprinted when he strode
from the west, and paused:

Nothing much to see there
in the watery east, he braced
himself on this mountain,
skidding a mighty stone
over the flooded continent.

VIII

East from Glacier Park
an immense herd lies buried.

Thighbones, blunt ends of ribs
break through the soil,
a little grass like hair
straying over them in the wind.

Whatever they were, Mastodon,
Great Horse, Bison
or something no one has named,
they were hunted down
by the cold, starved
in the great earth changes.

We read in this landscape
how they came and went:

Faces to the ground, feeding,
following the gusty ridges,
they had lakes for eyes,
and the future drained away
as they moved and fed.

IX

After the twenty thousand year
seige of rain and ice
the broken gates stand open;
a few rocks piled at the portals,
far plains strewn with bones.

From the long march overland,
scouring the rockwalls,
making camp at the foot of moraines,

we came to this sprawling
settlement of wind and dust,
these streets laid out
among the boulders, metal signs
pocked and flapping.

No great encampment stands in view
at Browning. We are awake
in our own desolate time;

clotheslines whipping the air
with sleeves and pockets,
little fists of plastic bags
beating the stony ground.

